

# Leventhal faces challenge as head of council

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ROCKVILLE — George Leventhal is taking the helm of the Montgomery County Council as it faces tough decisions over the fate of the chair of the beleaguered planning board and an ailing planning process.

Meeting informally with reporters Wednesday, the day after his election as council president for 2006, Mr. Leventhal said some people are urging the council to tell planning board chair Derick Berlage now whether they want him to serve another four-year term or not.

"Some people think it's urgent that we tell (Mr. Berlage) whether we think he should stay or go," Mr. Leventhal said.

Mr. Berlage's term ends in June.

"We are discussing it extensively," Mr. Leventhal said.

Mr. Leventhal said he is meet-

ing with his colleagues individually on the matter and sending a memo suggesting several procedural options, including a selection process with a longer deadline for applying for the position.

Mr. Leventhal was asked for his reaction to County Executive Douglas Duncan's challenge to the council to decide whether it needs to launch a national search for a replacement for the board leadership.

That came during Mr. Duncan's State of the County address Tuesday night.

The new council president said he believes Mr. Berlage intends to apply for a second term. Mr. Berlage couldn't be reached for comment.

A supporter of Mr. Duncan in his run for governor, Mr. Leventhal dismissed suggestions that Clarksburg is a symbol of deep corruption or conflict of interest. The planning board has been criticized for its role in allowing setback and height restriction viola-

tions for a Clarksburg development.

"Clarksburg makes all of us look bad," Mr. Leventhal said. "We have to get a handle on it and exercise good management. If (Mr. Duncan) wants to add a staff person for Clarksburg, I'll vote for it."

Mr. Duncan wants an ombudsman who would report directly to him and work with the community that flagged building violations in the Clarksburg Town Center development.

Mr. Leventhal agrees with the Mr. Duncan's call for a property tax rate cut in the coming fiscal year, but declined to say whether it should be the 9 1/2 cents he recommended or a different amount.

"The chances are we will be able to provide a significant tax cut," he said.

A member of Mr. Duncan's handpicked "End Gridlock" team when he was elected to an at-large seat on the council in 2002, Mr. Leventhal said he will not be running for re-election in 2006 on any

slate of candidates.

"I'll run independently on my record. We are not going to have a repeat 'End Gridlock' scenario. We have not ended gridlock. Dealing with traffic is still a priority."

Other issues on the top of his agenda include development rights in the Agriculture Reserve, domestic workers, green buildings and workforce housing.

"We are on a real good track with Montgomery Cares, and I want to make sure we stay on track with that," he said.

Montgomery Cares, a health program run by the county, was budgeted at \$5 million this fiscal year and should get \$20 million by 2010.

Mr. Leventhal, chair of the council's Health and Human Services Committee, said he's trying to bring in universal health care and plans to have an advisory board with representatives of hospitals and clinics. The council is also looking at a pilot dental program with a university.